

THE BISHOP OF ROCHESTER'S THANKSGIVING

S E R M O N

PREACHED BEFORE THE

LORDS SPIRITUAL AND TEMPORAL,

ON TUESDAY, NOVEMBER THE FIFTH, 1776.



A THANKSGIVING
SERMON
PREACHED BEFORE THE
LORDS SPIRITUAL AND TEMPORAL
IN THE
ABBEY CHURCH, WESTMINSTER,
ON TUESDAY, NOVEMBER THE FIFTH, 1776.

BY THE RIGHT REVEREND
John L.
JOHN LORD BISHOP OF ROCHESTER,
AND DEAN OF WESTMINSTER.

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MDCCLXXVI.

Die Veneris, 8^o Novembris, 1776.

ORDERED, by the Lords Spiritual and Temporal in Parliament assembled, That the Thanks of this House, be, and are, hereby given to the Lord Bishop of ROCHESTER, for the Sermon by him preached before this House, on Tuesday last, in the Abbey Church, Westminster; and he is hereby desired to cause the same to be forthwith printed and published.

ASHLEY COWPER,

Cler. Parliamentor.



S E R M O N, &c.

LUKE, CHAP. IX. VER. 54, 55, 56.

And when his Disciples James and John saw this, they said; Lord ! wilt thou that we command Fire to come down from Heaven to consume them as Elias did ?

But He turned and rebuked them, and said, Ye know not what manner of spirit ye are of :

For the Son of Man is not come to destroy Mens Lives, but to save them.

RELIGIOUS persuasion, when founded on Truth, is a powerful principle of action : it is not less so when built upon Error ; but the effects are widely different : the one producing a sober and uniform disposition to promote the glory of God, and the good of mankind ; whilst the other, hurried on with much intemperate heat, thinks to do God service, by violating the Laws of Equity and Humanity.

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Of the pernicious effects of such an erroneous Zeal, the history of every Religion, Age, and Nation presents us with numerous proofs; but not one, among them all, that comes up to that execrable, inhuman Attempt, the providential defeat whereof, we this day thankfully commemorate.—The malevolent purpose of the two Disciples will, upon a comparison, appear to fall far short of it. Both parties were, indeed, actuated by “a Zeal without knowledge:” both considered the Objects of their malice as HERETICS devoted to perdition, and both fought to realize their intended Vengeance by the means of inevitable destruction.—And although it may seem strange, that the constant followers of their Divine Master,—they who had always seen his miraculous powers exerted for the Benefit, never to the prejudice, much less to the destruction of mens lives,—that they should wish him to enable them to “call down fire from Heaven” to consume a poor Village with its inhabitants;—it will, however, lessen our surprize, if we consider, that the two Disciples were still in the profession of a Religion, which had only temporal Rewards and Punishments for its Sanctions. They remembered a somewhat similar instance under that Dispensation, and referred to it as a precedent; they knew, too, that their Lord assumed a “Power to forgive Sins”; and it was natural for them to believe He had power likewise to punish them: but they themselves did not assume that power—The over-zealous followers of another Master impiously assumed both: and what in James and

John

John seems only to have been a sudden start of Passion against a few inhospitable Samaritans; which however was soon corrected by the gentle rebuke they met with; was, in the incorrigible and fiery Zealots of this day, a deep and long concerted Plot of more extensive ruin—It was to destroy, by a most Infernal Explosion, THE KING, THE PRINCES, THE PRELATES, THE NOBLES AND COMMONS OF THE REALM when assembled in Parliament—It was to overturn and tear up, from the very foundation, the whole frame of the Constitution in CHURCH AND STATE, and instead thereof, to erect under the baneful shade of Intolerance, an uncontrollable Dominion over the persons, and property, and Consciences of all who should “not fall down and worship the Idolatrous Images they meant to set up”.

Unhappy, infatuated Men! to think of Re-establishing a Religion by means so contrary to the humane, and benevolent Principles of its blessed Author! Well had it been for them, if they, who pretended to have the Key of all Scripture-knowledge, had thence learnt “what manner of Spirit” they ought to have been of! Well had it been, if they, who arrogantly assumed to be of the SOCIETY OF JESUS, had observed His ~~Recepts~~^{Recepts} ~~Accents~~^{Accents}, and governed themselves by His Example who “came not to destroy mens lives but to save them.”

But I mean not to “bring against them a railing Accusation”: they “have received the due reward of their

“deeds”. It will be more pleasing to every good mind, and may tend in some measure, to excite our Gratitude for the repeated mercies of this day, to observe, from the declaration in the text, That one of the many benefits, which the world hath derived from the Christian Institution, is,

That it hath produced a happy change, even in regard to the present interests of Mankind, by giving a more extensive activity to the principles of Justice, and Humanity; and contributing to lessen the miseries, and increase the happiness of Human Life, beyond the Example of former times.

I presume it will be admitted, that this Declaration of our Lord, though it includes but a small part of that wonderful plan of Goodness which he came to execute, is, however, such a part as proclaims him merciful and gracious, studious of the welfare, and solicitous for the safety and tranquility of Human Life. It is, indeed, a most engaging instance of his own benevolence and Humanity; sufficient to induce the Unbeliever himself to admire, and imitate so amiable a Character. “If in this life only he hath hope”; if Nature teacheth him to wish its preservation; to be secure from the violence of the Oppressor, and the persecution of the Zealot; to be easy and unmolested in his enjoyments, relieved and pitied in his misfortunes; if these be the principal Ends the Unbeliever aims at, let him not revolt at the

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means that are offered by his Saviour. Especially, as the offer is charged with no Mystery to affront his Reason; nor inforced with any Authority to disgust his Pride. The meek and lowly Jesus doth not here assume the glorious Titles that were justly given Him. Whenever he thought fit to give proofs of his Divinity, by exerting his miraculous powers, he left others to proclaim him the SON OF GOD: but when he was to set an Example of his Benevolence and Humanity, he condescends to stile himself the SON OF MAN. Under this tender relation, He was sensibly affected at the miseries and calamities brought upon Man by Man.—He saw from what turbid sources those disorders were wont to flow: and he provided, as far as wisdom and goodness could provide, an effectual remedy in the humane and generous principles of his Religion: A Religion that was not to be local, or confined within the limits of one Country, or People; but was, progressively, to diffuse its mild and merciful Spirit over the face of the whole Earth. And, in this sense, it may be said to be a Religion of HUMANITY; as, in the sense of the Apostle, HUMANITY IS RELIGION.

That the beneficial influence of Christianity hath been more generally felt than acknowledged, is undoubtedly true; because it is likewise true, that men are apt to rest contented with the fruition of any Good, without troubling themselves to investigate the cause. They may perhaps have observed that other Religions, and some modes even of the Christian

Christian Religion, have been imposed by means the most injurious to human Happiness—PAGANISM by impure and barbarous Rites; MOHAMMEDISM by Compulsion and the Sword of Violence: SUPERSTITIOUS BIGOTRY by fettering the Mind, and tormenting the Body; and ENTHUSIASM of every sort, by the subversion of Order and Legal Government: But they might likewise see and experience, that pure and GENUINE CHRISTIANITY breaths nothing but “ Peace and “ good will towards men”: is a rule of conduct that must, in every view, approve itself to their social Nature; and is so far from countenancing any violation of their respective interests, that it strengthens all the ties of Justice and Humanity; injoining us to “ speak evil of no man”, to “ do violence to no man,” but giving us a “ new Commandment “ to love one another; to do good to those that hate us, and “ to pray for them that despitefully use us, and persecute “ us;” thereby disposing us to be serviceable to each other in the several connexions of Domestic, Social, and Commercial Life; and creating a reciprocal Confidence and Fidelity in our Dealings, from a strict regard to that equitable precept of always “ doing to others, what we expect they “ should do unto us”.—Christianity, thus transfusing its Divine Philanthropy into the Religious and Civil Establishments of any Country, will not give the least colour for Oppression in the one, or Persecution in the other—It may enable men to bear, but will never impose, them.

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How far, and in what particular instances these benevolent principles have been found to operate, would lead to an enquiry beyond our reach. Virtue and Vice, respecting either Times, or Persons, can only be comparative: And although to fix a charge of Cruelty and Inhumanity on any particular Age, or Nation, may seem an uncharitable, as well as doubtful imputation; yet, if we consider the temper and conduct of the world in general, antecedent to the time when our Saviour came to instruct and reform it, we shall find that the natural ties of Equity and Humanity, which were graciously intended to form the strongest bond of social happiness, had but a feeble and precarious hold upon the bulk of Mankind. Ever ready “ to break its bands asunder “ and to cast away its cords from them,” they left little security for many of the present rights and privileges of human life; no effectual security for life itself, in most of the Religious and Civil Institutions which then obtained in the World. For, as every Government, if those deserve that name, would, of course, adopt some mode of Religion; so the Principles of such Religion would have their natural influence upon the rules of Government. But, in those times, the Princes of the Earth were despotic, and their Religion idolatrous; alike unfavorable to the interests, and prodigal of the lives of men.

Miserable condition of human nature! when Dominion was founded upon Oppression, and the most essential part of Religious worship consisted in Cruelty—Most unnatural Cruelty!

Cruelty! when, as the Prophet describes it, “ they caused “ their sons and their daughters to pass through the fire unto “ Moloch”.

If it be said that no conclusion can hence be drawn in favour of Christianity; inasmuch as those were times of ignorance, and savage manners; unpolished by the Arts, unacquainted with the Refinements of Social Life: so that, admitting the present condition of Mankind to be more happy, it is only because States and Kingdoms are more civilized, and the rules of Policy and good Government better understood.—

But, is not this to mistake the effect for the cause? and to suppose, that the Principles of true Religion have no part in the Institutions, no influence on the manners of a Civilized People? If nothing was ever wanted to establish a general sense of humanity, but Civilization and sound Policy; whence was it that, in the celebrated States of GREECE and ROME, Soils that produced much Philosophic Virtue, such modes of cruelty were authorised and practised, as, in these days, would strike a religious mind with horror. Whence was it that they, with all the Learning, the Arts and Embellishments of Life, not only connived at, but gave a public Sanction to Customs directly repugnant to the Laws of Nature itself? I am not here alluding to the many ingenious torments inflicted on the un-offending Christians—not other-
wife

wise offending, than because they were **CHRISTIANS**; and would not be **IDOLATORS**.—The features of those times were marked, if possible, with more inhuman traits—Where, for instance, was that parental Affection and care for their Infant Offspring, which the Universal Parent hath impressed on the fiercest Animals?—Where those generous sensations of pity and concern for the Unhappy, which should distinguish and adorn the rational Species? when Those were sacrificed to the convenience, and These to the diversion and entertainment of the Public!—If their Religion taught them that their gods were powerful and vindictive, if a vainglorious pride led them to account the rest of Mankind Barbarians, and to treat them as such; or, if the Laws of Humanity were so far superseded by those of Conquest, that they were not ashamed to sport with the miseries of their Captive fellow creatures, could the unfeeling barbarity of savage Life itself do more?

The truth is, we are so dazzled, in our younger years, with the splendid Actions of the Great, and so delighted with the ingenious productions of the learned Men of those times, that we overlook the Inhumanity, the Injustice, and Oppression, which were both the cause, and the effect of their enormous Grandeur. And hence the great Apostle sums up the general character of the Gentile world by asserting, what, in similar terms, their own Historians are candid enough to acknowledge, that they were “ **FULL OF ENVY, MUR-**

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“ **DER,**

“ DER, DECEIT,—WITHOUT NATURAL AFFECTION, IM-
“ PLACABLE, UNMERCIFUL”.

Nor were these destructive Principles peculiar to the Nations which knew not God. Even “ the Vine which his “ own right hand had planted,” became so degenerate, that “ When the Master of the Vineyard looked that it should “ have brought forth Grapes,” the generous fruits of every Virtue; “ behold it brought forth wild grapes;” nothing but the four pernicious spirit of malice and uncharitableness. Hating, and hated by, the rest of the world, the JEWS were not only divided into Factions; but their Religion too was split into various Sects. Hence sprung Enthusiasm, and Fanaticism on the one hand; Sedition and Insurrections on the other: whilst the malignant Doctrine of Retaliation furnished a weapon common to all. Indeed, the nearer they approached the expected Period of their Deliverance from the ROMAN Yoke; and it was from a triumphant Messiah that they did expect it; the more their Enthusiasm began to operate; for the same Spirit that corrupted their Religion, had perverted their Judgment. THEIR MESSIAH was to take ample Vengeance on all their Enemies—They rejected him as the PRINCE OF PEACE, who came “ not to destroy “ mens lives but to save them.”

But happy had it been for them, and for all who have since called upon his Name, if his tender care and solicitude for the comfort and security of human life, had always had its due effect! as it certainly would have, was the merciful spirit

spirit of his Religion every where properly cultivated; and left to its natural, unperverted influence on the human mind. But the perversion of a rule is often found to produce as much mischief as the having no rule at all. Hence those unscriptural Doctrines, and erroneous Tenets, which have sometimes committed the Christian world in most destructive Conflicts, to the reproach of its Humanity. Hence also those bloody Tragedies that have often been acted under the Mask of Zeal for a PRETENDED INFALLIBLE CHURCH; which, in some countries not yet rescued from its usurpations, still keeps the Sword of Persecution unsheathed, and suspended over Truth and Liberty.

And yet, Infidelity will find little cause of triumph in these unhappy Divisions, as they are no more than our Divine Master and his Apostles prepared us to expect; intimating, that, as the genuine Spirit of his Religion would not fail to be adulterated, and his Doctrines perverted to promote the views of selfishness and ambition, it would seem as if He “ came not to send Peace upon Earth, but a Sword.”

But granting, what is much to be lamented, that the peace of the World hath often been disturbed, and its happiness interrupted on a religious account; is this to be imputed to the natural spirit of Christianity, or to the Corruptions that have been artfully introduced into it?—If the great Physician of Souls hath prescribed a proper remedy to “ fave

“mens Lives,” is HE to be blamed because others have added such baneful ingredients as tended “ to destroy them”? As well may we blame that glorious luminary the SUN, because its rays, when concentrated to a point, will burn, and consume whatsoever they are aimed at.—No, to do justice to the mild, beneficial Influence of the Christian Religion, we should take our estimate of it from those Establishments where its generous Principles are suffered to have their free course; not where they are wrested to serve the purposes of despotic Power, or with-held to keep the mind in a state of submissive ignorance—not where Men are enjoined to believe what Reason pronounces incredible, and are “ compelled to “ come in” to a mode of Worship, which by its pomp and splendor, is more calculated to captivate the senses, than to correct the heart: but, where the Scriptures, as happily amongst ourselves, are allowed to be read with freedom, and are explained with sincerity: where the established form of worship is solemnized with Decency; and every conscientious separation from it is tolerated with Charity.—In a word, where each Individual enjoys his civil and religious Freedom, under no restraints, but such as the public Wisdom hath judged conducive to the public Safety. Opinions, indeed, will be free; and they will also be different: they are the natural offspring of Reason, and moral Intellect; nor will true Religion, or just Government ever decline to be tried by them: so that however Men may differ in lesser matters, or on points of indifferent Obligation; yet, whilst

they

they do not disturb the Peace of Society, nor strike at fundamental principles, a Protestant government will not controul, much less will it persecute such Opinions—For “why should one Man’s liberty be judged of another Man’s conscience? to his own Master he must stand or fall.” This is the Apostle’s rule: and it is a glorious proof of the wisdom and temper of this Country, that our LAWS, and our RELIGION hold the same language.

Surely, then, if this be a desirable state of things, we, of these days, ought to be more particularly thankful for it; as there were times when our less happy fore-fathers did not enjoy it—A time, especially, scarce beyond memory, when their dearest Rights and Privileges were made to fly like chaff, before the wind of a DISPENSING POWER: When the royal Word gave no confidence; the most solemn of all Oaths no security; nor the established Religion and Laws an effectual Barrier against the insidious Attacks of Popish Counsellors, and arbitrary Measures.—And to what are we to ascribe our Deliverance from those worst of Grievances? but, under Providence, to the auspicious Arrival of that Generous, Humane PRINCE, which rendered this day still more memorable by an additional Blessing: and who came not to seize the spoils of a tottering Constitution, but to repair, and establish it upon that firm, and solid Basis, which nothing but our own weakness or perverseness can destroy.

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We must not, however, “ think more highly of our-selves than we ought to think ;” nor assume an exclusive claim to the beneficial influences of Christianity.—Even in those Dominions where human traditions are imposed with as much solemnity as inspired Truths, the Sun of Righteousness, amidst all the Clouds of Art and Ignorance that obscure it, hath happily dispelled many distressful circumstances of human life, that passed unpitied, or unrelieved by any public provision in former times—Not the most civilized parts of the Pagan world were adorned with such commodious receptacles, as are now every where open to the disabled, and unfortunate part of Mankind. Nay, the very “ Weapons of War” are now subject to Laws of Humanity, and its “ arrows no longer drunk with the blood of Captives” : but, if “ wounded and sore smitten,” they are treated with such tender care, with such skilful assiduity, that the art of destroying Men’s lives, is, perhaps, less improved than the art of saving them.

And yet, that there should be so much unhappy occasion of thus exercising either the one or the other, is a painful reflexion to every good Mind,—is affecting also both from religious and social Considerations ; inasmuch as the present temper of too many of our Protestant Brethren, embroiled, as it is, by the seducing arts of their ambitious Leaders ; seems little disposed to act agreeably to the Principles of that “ Faith which worketh by Love.”

But

But we are encouraged to hope better things: and the pleasing Accounts we have received of the Success of his Majesty's Arms, over those of his deluded Subjects, is a good ground of Hope.—Let this be a further Motive with us of praise and thankfulness to Almighty God for the merciful Deliverances of this Day: and may it speedily incline Them to consider “what manner of Spirit they ought to be of,” and to “know the things that belong to their Peace, before “they be hid from their eyes.” In the mean time, let us be careful not to forfeit the Divine Protection by an ungrateful sence of it; but let us ever acknowledge, and adore that merciful Providence which hath been so frequently manifested in favour of our happy Constitution: at one time delivering it from a superstitious tyranny, which held even “our Kings “in chains, and our Nobles as with links of iron”: at another, preserving it from the implacable and Hellish malice of Popish conspirators—Then, recovering it from the impious hand of Usurpation—Again, rescuing it from the intemperate Zeal of despotic Bigotry—and, at last, happily settling it where every Lover of his Country, every Friend to civil Liberty and true Religion, will rejoice to see it flourish.

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